

The Music Academy

Malathi Rangaswamy, Secretary, Music Academy

The Madras Music Academy is one of the premier and the earliest organizations founded in Madras [now Chennai] for promoting Carnatic Music. Founded more than 75 years ago, it plays an important role in promoting and archiving Music. Though there are older organizations like the Parthasarathi Swamy Sabha founded in 1900, it was the Music Academy that set the trend of conducting the world famous music festival or the music season of Chennai as is known world over between December and January every year.

The Music Academy, Chennai, is a cultural institution par excellence. The Academy, which celebrated its Platinum Jubilee in the year 2001-2002, was founded in 1928. The year 1927 is a significant one in the annals of the history of Madras, the present Chennai. That year the All India Congress Committee met in Madras under the presidentship of Dr. Ansari. The whole nation was gripped by nationalist fervor. Great leaders were fighting for freedom from the British yoke. Freedom fighters like S. Satyamurthi felt that along with the struggle for political freedom, people should be awakened to the cultural heritage of the land. With this object in mind, a resolution was passed at the Congress Committee meeting in January 1928 that an Academy of Music should be founded. As a result of this, the Madras Music Academy was founded in 1928, not merely as a platform for cultural events but as an institution for the revival and restoration of the nation's pride in its rich and ancient cultural heritage.

The objects of the Academy, inter-alia, are to hold annual music conferences in December or any convenient period, to collect, preserve and publish compositions, manuscripts, to publish a journal every year, to encourage and help deserving musicians and scholars by bringing them to the notice of the public, to conduct examinations, tests and competitions, to make representations from time to time to the authorities in all matters relating to music and to construct a music hall.

The Reception Committee of the Conference was elected in a meeting on March 5, 1928, and a provisional Executive Committee to organize the Academy. In April 1928, an Expert Committee consisting leading musicians and scholars was elected to advise the Academy on all technical matters including music education.

The Music Academy was formally inaugurated at a public function on August 18 by C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer in the YMIA Auditorium before a large and a distinguished gathering. Dr. U. Rama Rao was the founder-president. He was succeeded by K.V. Krishnaswami Aiyar under whose leadership the Academy developed and expanded its activities. Sangita Kalanidhi T.L. Venkatrama Iyer was the third President and Rajam the fourth, K.R. Sundaram Iyer the fifth, T.T. Vasu the sixth and N. Murali is the seventh and present President.

Earlier, the programs of the Academy were held at different places in the city of Madras:

1. **A special *pandal* behind the Ripon Building, Peoples' Park.**
2. **In the premises of 'Funnels', opposite Satyamurthi Bhavan, General Patters Road.**
3. **In the premises of 'Woodlands' Royapettah**
4. **University Senate House**
5. **Sri Sundareswarar Hall Mylapore**
6. **P.S. High School Mylapore.**

From 1962, the programs are held at the Academy's own premises on T.T.K. Road [formerly Mowbrays Road] at the T.T. Krishnamachariar Auditorium, the foundation for which was laid by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru the then-Prime Minister of India in the year 1955, and declared open by Jayachamarajendra Wodiyar, who was the Governor of Madras.

The Academy was started with some specific aims and objectives. It has many firsts to its credit. The first twenty five years of the Academy is a very important period when a solid foundation was laid and the Academy succeeded in substantially achieving its objectives.

Right from 1929 the Academy started holding its conferences and concerts regularly in the month of December. It is the fore- runner of many more music *sabhas* which have made Chennai the Mecca of music lovers from India and abroad especially during the music season in December.

The Journal of the Music Academy:

The publication of the Journal of the Academy was begun in the year 1930. This unique journal is published annually. It brings out reports of the proceeds of the conference, the papers presented, ensuing discussions and conclusions, besides erudite articles relating to music and dance. It is published the following year. It is a very useful and valuable document. So far seventy eight volumes have been brought out. Besides the Journal the Academy has many publications to its credit, treatises on the science of art and music, by erudite scholars and authorities on the subject in the original and translation. The souvenir-cum-program book brought out during the annual conferences is a collector's item.

Academy's role in the revival of Bharatanatyam:

Bharatha Natyam is a classical dance of South India, derived from the earlier forms of *Sadir* or *Koothu*. The traditional *devadasis* were custodians of the art. In the 1920s and 1930s, the art form was endangered when the *devadasi* system fell into disrepute. Watching these developments, the Experts Committee of the Music Academy initiated several steps for the restoration of the art. On March 15, 1931, the Academy presented two *devadasi* dancers known as the Kalyani daughters [Rajalakshmi and Jeevarathnam] on its own platform. It was the first ever dance program arranged by the Academy or any other institution of prestige in Madras. The Academy continued to encourage the art by arranging Bharatha Natyam performances during the annual conferences. The Expert's Committee passed a resolution renaming *Sadir* as Bharathanatyam at the 1932 conference. Music Academy's exposure of the dance form gave a fillip to the art. Many girls from families other than the devadasis started learning and giving dance recitals on stage.

The Academy ran a dance school taught by the legend T.Balasaraswathi for a while. Many reputed dancers and dance teachers were honored by the Academy with awards and titles. In the year 1973, the Expert's Committee of the Academy elected the dancer of repute T.Balasaraswathi, the first and only dancer till date to be so honored, as the President of the Conference and conferred the title '*Sangita Kalanidhi*' on her.

Till the year 2005, dance programs formed a part of the annual concert series. As it was felt that dance was not given enough representation, a week-long Dance Festival follows in January following the concert series has been started from 2006, thanks largely to the munificence of a NRI rasika, Sridhar Pottarazu.

Thanks to the effort of the Music Academy, Bharata Natyam has found the rightful place among the performing arts of South India.

Another art which is declining owing to the onset of cinema and electronic media is *Harikatha*. The Academy, right from the beginning, has been encouraging the art, by arranging programs at its premises and also sponsoring programs outside.

Three of its *Sangita Kalanidhi* awardees were 'Harikatha' exponents.

- 1. Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar in 1930**
- 2. Mangudi Chidambara Bhagavathar in 1937**
- 3. Embar Vijayaragahavachariar in 1982.**

Special honors and certificates of merits were awarded to many other artists like Saraswathi Bai and T.S.Balakrishna Sastrigal.

Music Academy's Teacher's College of Music:

The Teacher's College of Music is an important component of the Music Academy. One of the aims of the Academy was to start a college of music to train teachers in imparting the theory and practice of music in the correct methodology.

The Teacher's College of Music, the first of its kind, was started in 1931. The syllabus for the courses of study was drawn up by a committee of experts. *Vidwan* Tiger Varadachariar was the first principal of the college. Since then the College has had some eminent *Sangita Kalanidhi* and *Sangitha Kalacharya awardees* as its principals. The present Principal is *Vidwan Sangita Kalacharya* Chingelput Ranganathan.

The College was granted recognition by Mevri Sthatam in 1937. Till 2005, the College followed the syllabus drawn up by its experts when it was started, a three year certificate course and a two year advanced course '*Sangita Ratna*'. From 2006, it has switched to the Government syllabus of a four year diploma course with the conferring of '*Isai kalaimamani*' after three years. The *Sangita Ratna* course also continues.

The college maintains a high standard in music. It has a very good reputation and students passing out get good placements as teachers of music, jobs in All-India –Radio and in cinema. Some have also gone abroad, trained pupils and brought credit to the College. *Vidhushi* R. Vedavalli has received the highest honor of '*Sangita Kalanidhi*' from the Academy.

The Academy also conducts a six year Mridangam course, headed by '*Sangita Kalanidhi*' Umayalapuram Sivaraman and a Vina course taught by Vina *Vidwan* Trivandrum Venkatraman.

The '*Birudu*' of *Sangitha Kalanidhi*':

The *Birudu* or title of *Sangita Kalanidhi* conferred by the Music Academy on the Presidents of annual conferences is the dream and aspiration of each and every musician. It is considered to be the highest honor a musician can receive - a 'Nobel Prize' in Carnatic Music.

The conferment of the title was started in 1942 and every *Vidwan* who has presided over the annual conferences, right from the Academy's inception, have been bestowed with the title. Almost all the greats of Carnatic musicians of the 20th century have presided over the Academy's annual conferences, performed on its stage and been honored by the Academy. Semmangudi, the doyen of Carnatic Music, started his career in Madras on the platform of the Madras Music Conference in 1927 and gave his last public performance at the Music Academy in 2000. The world famous M.S. Subbulakshmi performed at the Academy for many years. She was closely associated with the Academy and gave benefit performances for the Academy's building fund. The

veteran musician, D.K.Pattamal, known for clarity and pure traditional style devoid of flamboyance, holds the record for her unbroken annual performances for fifty four years from 1934 to 1988 at the Music Academy. She never took any emoluments for her performances. The notable Bharatnatyam dancer T.Balasaraswathi performed regularly at the Academy.

The Academy, from its early years, invited famous Hindusthani musicians to perform on its stage, and thus exposed southern audiences to the richness of the parallel system. During its Platinum Jubilee Celebrations in 2002, inaugurated by then-President Abdul Kalam, the Academy honored Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, M.S.Subbulakshmi, D.K.Pattamal and Sitar Maestro Pandit Ravishankar with a special Platinum Jubilee Award.

Over the years, many eminent personalities, *zamindars*, heads of Princely states, Presidents of India, Chief Ministers of States, Ministers from the Central and State Governments and people in high offices have inaugurated the annual conferences.

Endowments:

Many endowments have been instituted by generous donors and well wishers for scholarships, prizes, and conducting special music and dance programs. A special program is sponsored in the name of the late Smt Ambujam Krishna by her family members for conducting composers' day.

The Hindu has instituted an annual Sangita Kalanidhi M.S.Subbulakshmi award of Rs. 1 lakh to be given to the Sangita Kalanidhi-elect on the inaugural day of the Conference. A monthly junior concert and two annual senior concerts are sponsored by HCL Technologies.

Sri. K.R. Sunderam Iyer Memorial Library and Archives:

The Academy maintains a large library which is gradually growing with the acquisition of new books apart from a vast collection of rare books and manuscripts. The Archives section has a vast collection of music tapes. Modernization of the library has begun. With a generous donation from A. Sivasailam, the digitization of tapes and lamination and restoration of books are in process. Very soon the library will be ready for the public with all modern amenities.

The Library is housed in the Music Academy's annex, the Kasthuri Srinivasa Building, where the Committee room, Recording room and a Mini Auditorium are also located.

The Academy is gaining respect and recognition in India and abroad. As the Music Academy marches on triumphantly from its Platinum Jubilee to its centenary, it can look back with pride on its achievements, carving for itself a niche in the music world.

For more about the Academy log into—www.musicacademymadras.in

The author of this article is Mrs. Malathi Rangaswamy, the Past Vice President and present Secretary of the Music Academy. Having graduated from Queen Mary's in Economics and History, and post graduated from Annamalai University, she did her Ph. D in [Cultural]History in the University of Madras in 2007. She was the Past President of the Rasika Ranjani Sabha. She is also the correspondent of the Teachers' college of Music, Music Academy